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The middle classes and their aristocratic others: culture as nature in classification struggles.

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[T]he 'middle class' in England can be seen as a pre-eminently historical category, the result of accumulated 'middles' or spaces between – between aristocracy and working class, land and labour, highbrow and lowbrow, provincial marginality and metropolitan power – the balance of which has altered over time. The categories through which classes have been classified in England are political and economic, yet also profoundly cultural (Simon Gunn, 'Translating Bourdieu, pp. 61-62).

[M]embers of the privileged classes are naturally inclined to regard as a gift of nature a cultural heritage which is transmitted by a process of unconscious training. But, in addition, the contradictions and ambiguities of the relationship which the most cultured among them maintain with their culture are both permitted and encouraged by the paradox which defines the 'realization' of culture as *becoming natural* (Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 234. Emphasis his).

Introduction

This article is an attempt to consider English middle-class identities and their relationship to 'the right ways of being and doing' (Bourdieu, 1986). In it, I consider

such identities and dispositions as part of the stakes in classed struggles. Their claims to normality and 'natural-ness', I argue, are an important element in the operation of class. Certainly, those classed struggles may not be conducted in conventional 'class for itself' terms, but, taken in the historical context of the emergence of a middle class with a distinctive hold on normality, morality and taste, they can be seen, nevertheless, as ways of distinguishing the worth of the middle classes *qua* middle classes. In this respect, I suggest, middle classness cannot be seen in isolation but has to be considered in the context of other groups which constitute its 'outside'. Class, in this context, has to be seen as both dynamic and relational: dynamic, because it is, in Bourdieu's words, 'not ...something given but as *something to be done*' (Bourdieu, 1998: 12, emphasis his); and relational because part of the logic of class relies on the making of distinctions between classes and class fractions.

Historically, the 'middle class' as a distinct grouping had to differentiate itself from both the 'lower orders' and the aristocracy (Bourdieu, 1986, Gunn, 2005). I have written elsewhere (Lawler, 2005) about the ways in which working-class existence continues to figure, within a middle-class imaginary, as the 'constitutive outside' of middle-classness. Here my focus is on the aristocracy; or, more accurately, on how the aristocracy is imagined within English middle-class self-formulation.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of *all* class classifications and to note the difficulty of definition. 'The aristocracy', especially, is difficult to straightforwardly categorize. Historically, and together with royalty, they have constituted a landowning class that has held power in feudal societies. With the rise of capitalism, the power of these groups has undoubtedly diminished, and

indeed they can be seen as representing a ‘problem’ within the modernist project, since their existence relies on ties of birth. Their basis in hereditary ties and hereditary privilege undercuts a modernist rhetoric of ‘self-making’¹. This is not the place to explore the composition or power of this group in its own right, however, and indeed, the focus of my argument here is not aristocracy /royalty itself. It is, rather, on the ways in which they matter within the cultural imaginary of English middle-class groups – as an ‘other’ to middle-class existence. Working-class people also form an other to this existence, of course, and seem to be a more immediate reference point (at least judging by the class hatred exhibited against them in public discourse). The aristocracy, together with royalty, however, appear to engender a different set of criteria against which middle-class existence is imagined, and it is this that I will explore here.

Middle-classness, similarly, can prove difficult to define, and can mean different things in different contexts. In this context, I am using it as a conceptual category which is distinguished from both the upper class / aristocracy and the working class. It is a signifier that ‘real’ empirical persons will approximate, or not, and in which they may or may not make investments². It is, of course, linked with material conditions but it is not the same as simply having money, for example. While, clearly, there are important differences *within* the category ‘middle class’, these differences may or may not be mobilized. Sometimes, as in the press representations I discuss here, appeals are made on behalf of a middle class that is cast as relatively homogeneous. This, I’d suggest, is because the immediate reference points, in this context, are not intra-class distinctions, but distinctions against another class grouping (the aristocracy). In this respect, the term is

predominantly used to denote a normatively desirable and indeed 'normal' and 'natural' status.

An examination of the ways in which the aristocracy is represented for and by a largely middle-class audience provides a way to analyse some important features of classed dynamics. First, it challenges notions of class as hierarchy (Bottero, 2004; see also Reay, 2005) since it is clear that the aristocracy cannot easily or straightforwardly occupy a place at the 'top' of a class structure. Indeed, and as I discuss later, their positions and dispositions are challenged by claims of middle-class normality. Second, these very claims to normality are grounded in claims to 'nature', as I discuss later. First, though, I want to consider why an attention to the middle classes is important.

The middle classes and their others

The English middle classes can be seen as having been brought into being through series of 'classification struggles' (Bourdieu, 1986; Gunn, 2005). That is, their emergence as a class depended on a differentiation from both the aristocracy (and royalty) and the 'labouring poor'. From the start, then, the middle classes had to produce themselves as a group distinct from their twin others. It is important to note that their emergence was associated with struggles, not only around political representation (as in the 1832 Reform Act³); but also around the ownership of cultural and moral distinction. Indeed, for Simon Gunn, the discursive components of the nineteenth century English bourgeoisie centred on culture and morality as well as politics and economics:

‘Culture’ in England was ... constitutive of both educated and popular understandings of class as these evolved over time. ... [C]ultural definitions and assumptions came to inform understandings of class in England at both the societal level and that of the state. For much of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, ‘culture’ was understood to be a significant – if not indispensable – part of what it meant to be ‘middle class’. (Gunn, 2005: 54).

If culture came to be the property of the new middle classes, then culture had to be conceptually removed from the classes who came to constitute their others⁴.

Struggles around cultural ownership, then, were a staple of an emergent middle class’s attempts to establish itself. And since culture has long discursive and conceptual links with morality (Bourdieu, 1986), claims to cultural ownership could easily be translated into claims to an ownership of morality. Along with these claims came claims to being a new, reforming social force (Davidoff and Hall, 1987; Joyce, 1994; Gunn, 2005); as indeed, the embodiment of ‘modernity’.

These three aspects of middle-class self-formation – culture, morality, and modernity - have solidified into an identity that has come to silently occupy a ‘normal’ ground. Middle-classness has become the benchmark of ‘normality’ against which other groups are measured (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Skeggs, 1997, Walkerdine *et al*, 2001). It has become, in many respects, an unmarked category. Its dispositions come to be marked as ‘good taste’, its cultural capitals marked as the ‘right’ ones. To question these values, dispositions and tastes, to suggest that what the middle classes know, or value, or want, might not be naturally and universally the right things, is to undermine an entire symbolic and cultural economy.

Furthermore, this positioning of the middle class as normal and normative has been strengthened, in England, by a cultural hegemony within academia, the media and the culture industries in which 'middle-class' is taken as the norm (albeit not without some limited contestation) against which other positions are deficient (see, e.g. Walkerdine *et al*, 2001, Skeggs 2004).

This hegemonic centrality, this privileged normality, are reasons, I'd argue, why an attention to the middle classes is crucial. As Mike Savage argues, it is important to get away from a 'mode of class analysis which takes the working class as the *archetypal* class' (Savage, 2000: 149. Emphasis his). This is not because working-class people are not important: they are. However, if class analysis is taken up only with the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, then I think we're missing something. Savage continues,

[M]uch unconscious intellectual baggage has been weighed down with the image of manual labour and its liberatory potential as the palimpsest of class (Savage, 2000: 149).

As other writers have noted, such an emphasis has led to a demand - from middle-class people - that the working class must bring about change, and a vicious condemnation when they fail to do so (Walkerdine, 1990; Skeggs, 1997). All of this also leaves intact the normalized position of the middle classes and the complexities of their privilege. In short, a failure to consider the middle classes when discussing class can lead to a failure to engage with the very claims to normality and universality that give class in contemporary England so much of its force and its impetus.

‘Culture becoming natural’

Part of the dynamism of class involves the creation of classed *identities*. Class in this sense is ‘folded’ into the self so that it is, in Annette Kuhn’s now-famous comment, ‘beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your psyche, at the very core of your being’ (Kuhn, 1995: 98). While Bourdieu has certainly not been the only theorist to note the fact that class does not exist only ‘out there’, but also comes to reside ‘within’ (see also, e.g. Steedman 1989: Walkerdine *et al*, 2001) in ways that conventional class-for-itself formulations do not begin to get at, his concept of *habitus* represents, in my view, the best, most systematic and most convincing analysis of classed identities and subjectivities, and indeed of the relation between ‘large-scale’ social relations, and personal and quotidian pleasures and pains.

Habitus gives a means of seeing the ways in which personhood is produced within the crucible of social relations, and also forces an analysis of people’s history (both personal history and the inheritance of familial history). No-one lives in an eternal present and indeed we are classed long before we enter a workplace (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989). Yet much class theory has been unconcerned with how people come to be the way they are, and indeed, how the way they are may operate as means of approving and disapproving others⁵. For Bourdieu, habitus is ‘embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). In this generative forgetting, the training received to be a certain way - to be disposed towards specific things and against others; to know and to value certain things, and not others; to speak in a particular way - all come to seem part of ‘nature’ rather than of social training. Furthermore, part of the ‘hidden

training' embodied in the habitus is the ability to pass judgements on others (although only some judgements will matter). The notion of habitus provides a way to think about the ways in which class (an artificial, artefactual system) becomes *naturalized* (into a property of persons).

As Bourdieu (1993) suggests, the middle classes' hold on what is to count as 'taste', as 'culture', correct behaviour, and so on, must somehow be legitimated. Yet the middle classes cannot claim the right of birth, since that would be to cede the ground to aristocratic principles. On the other hand, neither can they rely on a naturalized universalism, since to do so would remove the grounds of their legitimation: if everyone's position were equally tenable, then there would be nothing special about a middle-classed position and tastes and dispositions coded as working class would be equally acceptable. Hence a privileged middle-class position vis-a-vis morality, the appreciation of culture, etc. would be lost. The difficulty is managed, Bourdieu argues, through a magical conversion of culture into 'nature'. The formal and informal education that goes into learning the specifics of a culture become forgotten. Instead, tastes, knowledges and dispositions come to seem 'natural' and innate. We need to remember, of course, that only *some* knowledges, tastes and dispositions (those of the middle classes themselves) get to 'count'. Thus, bourgeois culture becomes nature, though it is of course a strange notion of 'nature' since some people are seen to lack it. Bourdieu writes of:

The paradox which defines the 'realization' of culture as *becoming natural*.

Culture is thus achieved only by negating itself as such, that is, artificial and artificially acquired, so as to become second nature, a habitus, possession turned into being (Bourdieu, 1993: 234, emphasis his).

Echoing his earlier argument in *Distinction* that:

The ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that ... it *naturalizes* real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature [in a] new mystery of immaculate conception (Bourdieu, 1986: 68).

While Bourdieu is referring here to ‘culture’ and ‘taste’ in the sense of aesthetic competence and appreciation, there is a broader point to be made. That is, culture and taste in the sense of the ‘right ways of being and doing’ has been claimed as a right by the middle classes, and this includes an understanding of the right ways to behave that is codified as manners and etiquette. These are not represented as a set of skills that anyone might have, but as an innate sense of what is important to know, to do, and to value. They are, as Bourdieu (1986) suggests, understood as being known instinctively, rather than through learning (this is why generative forgetting is so crucial). There must be no apparent effort since this would be to undermine claims to ‘nature’. Of course, the *mondain* aristocracy similarly makes claims to ‘instinctive’ understanding and ‘natural’ appreciation, so we might expect conflicts to arise if the aristocracy apparently asserts that *their* understanding and appreciation is superior to that of the bourgeoisie. This, indeed, is at the heart of the representations I discuss here.

Aristocratic Imaginings

The case study I will use to illustrate my argument is that of press coverage, within British ‘broadsheet’ national newspapers, of the reported split, in April 2007,

between Prince William, the oldest son of Prince Charles and the late Princess Diana, and Kate Middleton, his partner of four years. Prince William has been widely characterized as a 'modern' royal but he nevertheless lives a life of immense privilege and will (if all goes to plan) take the throne after the death of his father (the current heir to the British throne). Kate Middleton is privately educated and, by all accounts, from a wealthy upper-middle-class family. She, too, is immensely privileged. As we will see, however, her status as a commoner – and, moreover, as from a specific type of 'commoner' family – was crucial to representations of this split.

I am interested in the extraordinary level of press attention to this event, and, in particular, to the classed dimensions of the press coverage. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which press stories work to establish a normative middle-classed identity, and with their use of notions of 'nature', 'natural' and 'ordinary' to 'manage' class. In considering these representations, I am not attempting to claim that they can definitively encapsulate middle-class identity and self-representation. They are produced by and in response to specific class fractions. I would, however, claim that their use of specific classed symbols indicates something interesting about contemporary class relations and class identities in England. As Skeggs (2004) has argued:

Representation works with a logic of supplementarity, condensing many fears and anxieties within one classed symbol. It is the central mechanism for attributing value to categorizations (Skeggs, 2004: 117).

The press stories can be seen in terms of a puncture in the social normality of middle-class existence and middle-class normality, which must then be defended against. Although representations of the aristocracy contain little of the symbolic violence meted out to poor whites (Haylett, 2001; Skeggs, 1997)), both groups are portrayed by a specific (and influential) middle-class fraction – journalists, social commentators, MPs, etc - as the other to middle-classness.

The analysis that follows is based on a close thematic reading of all the stories, within British broadsheet⁶ or ‘quality’ newspapers, which referenced ‘Kate Middleton’ between April 2007 and August 2007 (193 in total)⁷. The newspapers in question were *The Guardian*, *The Observer* (sister paper of *The Guardian*), *The Independent*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Sunday Telegraph*. *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent* and *The Independent on Sunday* are broadly ‘left-liberal’ papers, while *The Times* and *The Telegraph* (and their Sunday versions) can be characterized as ‘centre right’ in terms of editorial policy. Reportage was roughly equal across the titles, with the exception of *The Independent*, which has a policy of giving no special prominence to royal stories, though even this title carried some pieces, albeit largely (though not exclusively) satirical ones. Defences of the middle classes, however, which I discuss more fully below, were more likely to be carried by *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and their Sundays. I chose to analyse broadsheets because they are usually understood as providing ‘serious’ news and comment, and they are disproportionately read by people in occupations normally regarded as ‘middle class’⁸ (National Readership Survey, 2007). Hence they provide a way (albeit an imperfect one) to consider how the middle classes talk *to* and *about* themselves.

The coverage I am concerned with began in April 2007, after the British tabloid, *The Sun* broke the story of the break-up of the relationship between Prince William and Kate Middleton, a relationship begun when both were students at St Andrew's University. The story of the split was repeated throughout the press, but early versions of this story in the UK national broadsheet papers were low-key, and included quotes from 'sources' or 'friends', attributing the split variously to William's army career, the strains of press intrusion, or William's unwillingness to marry young.

Very quickly, however, another story broke, and it is this story that is the focus of my attention here. In the subsequent story, it was claimed that the real reason for the split was the unsuitability of Kate Middleton's bourgeois family. They were, it was suggested, simply too *déclassé* for one of their members to marry into the Royal Family (and no doubt particularly to marry the heir to the throne). Allegedly, William's friends whispered 'doors to manual' when Kate was around – a reference to her mother, Carole Middleton's, former career as an airline stewardess. Furthermore, Carole Middleton herself was said to have committed a number of social gaffes, including saying 'Pleased to meet you' instead of 'How do you do?' on meeting the Queen (Her Majesty assumes that everyone will be pleased to meet her); chewing gum at William's passing out parade at the military academy, Sandhurst; saying 'pardon?', rather than 'what?'; and referring to the lavatory as the 'toilet'. She was, according to one 'royal insider' quoted in the *Daily Mirror* (and then re-quoted in all of the broadsheets) 'pushy, rather twee and incredibly middle-class'.

I think the gum chewing is a matter of record, although of course we have no way of knowing whether the other allegations are accurate. There might, indeed, be reason to be suspicious of the claims since they constitute Carole Middleton as an almost textbook case of non-U (i.e. non- upper class) language and manners as characterized in Alan Ross's (1954) essay, 'U and non-U: an Essay in Sociological Linguistics' and popularized through its inclusion in Nancy Mitford's 1956 book, *Noblesse Oblige*⁹.

What this later story seems to have done, however, is both to generate interest in the story itself (the couple splitting up) and to work as a springboard for wider reflections on class¹⁰. The bulk of the press coverage took the form of comment and opinion pieces, and it is important to note that, overall, the tone of many (though not all) of these pieces was one that might be characterized as playful. Several stories were explicitly satirical, including a guide on 'how not to be common' (*The Daily Telegraph*) and a quiz to determine your level of posh-ness (*The Independent*). Others employed an ironic distancing. Some used an explicit discussion of class to bemoan the continuing salience of class in Britain. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that these moves can be understood as ways for journalists to suggest that they themselves are at some distance from those who care about such things, serious points emerge that tell us something about the self-understanding of the English middle classes.

Let me repeat, then, that my analysis here is not directly concerned with the aristocracy itself, but with the ways in which they, together with royalty, are represented by an influential middle-class fraction, for a largely and presumptively

middle-class readership. In particular, I am concerned with how this group works as a negative foil to middle-class existence. As I will go on to discuss, the representations considered here can be understood in terms of self-definition, not in terms of what the middle classes are; not even in terms of what they are not; but in terms of *how they characterize themselves in the face of how another group might imagine them to be*. As we will see, this leads to some interesting attempts both to resist a placing as 'inferior' and to assert, or re-assert middle-class 'normality'.

'Admirable': defending the bourgeoisie

Throughout the press coverage, two principal and linked themes emerged: a defence of middle-classness, and a critique of an attention to class, in particular to classed markers such as language use¹¹. The coverage itself was sometimes vague on who exactly were those 'others' who seemed to be attacking the Middleton family (and thus, it is suggested, attacking bourgeois values and existence). Most references were to aristocrats / the aristocracy / the upper classes, but they were also referred to as 'the House of Windsor/ Royalty'; 'toffs' or, simply 'snobs'. In contrast, almost every story explicitly referenced the Middleton family itself as middle-class. So while 'they' may not be clearly or systematically defined, their alleged targets were clearly coded as middle-class or bourgeois.

If part of the stories centred on making Carole Middleton a textbook case of non-U behaviour, then other parts centred on making the Middletons textbook cases of (assumed) middle-class values: again and again they were characterized in terms of hard work, thrift, stable and 'normal' family life, the production of 'good' children. For example:

Few commentators have given the Middletons credit for their solid English bourgeois qualities. They have made a lot of money entirely through their own efforts, running a successful mail-order company, and they appear to be a close and stable family. (Hamilton, *The Times*, 17.4.2007)

Yet, within the broadsheet press, very many commentators *did* give the Middletons credit for such 'bourgeois qualities': indeed press coverage was filled with it:

If I had to choose a family for my daughter to marry into, it would be the Middletons, not the Windsors: self-made, unassuming, dignified, silent (Miles, *The Times*, 18. 4. 2007).

This admirable, entrepreneurial and really incredibly good-looking-for-her-age Berkshire mother [Carole Middleton] (Gove, *The Times*, 18. 4. 2007)

What offence have they committed, except working hard, showing enterprise and rearing a brood of glossy, pony-limbed, polite children who do them credit? Moir, *The Daily Telegraph*, 18.04.2007)

As well as this explicit iteration of the values of enterprise, hard work and family life, there were references to Michael and Carole Middleton's 'humble' roots. Carole Middleton was frequently and approvingly written of as a 'descendant of Durham miners'. What is interesting here is that Carole Middleton can be viewed with approval, not despite but because of her allegedly proletarian origins. Yet this

is not to suggest that working-classness is itself understood as an admirable state. Rather, what makes her so admirable is her 'escape' from such origins. The fact that she *has* made such an escape is understood as being a measure of her hard work and determination – values which have come to be seen as synonymous with middle-class existence – as well as of her recognition of the value of middle-classness itself (that is, she could only escape to the middle class by understanding such an escape as a worthy enterprise). In this way she is the embodiment of the worth of middle classness: an 'outsider' who fought her way in, thus confirming the belief that fighting one's way in is worthwhile. She is (or her precursors are) represented as accruing value, then, by showing sufficient 'enterprise' to have escaped¹².

Perhaps, however, the more immediate implicit contrast is with those who are considered to have generations of privilege behind them. That is, Carole Middleton can be deemed more worthy of her wealth and social position because (it's suggested) she has not inherited them. In this way, an apparently self-made and 'open' middle class is contrasted with an aristocracy / royalty which relies on hereditary privilege and closes ranks to outsiders. Although not stated, this looks very like a moral distinction between the deserving and the undeserving rich¹³. (A section of) the aristocracy is represented here as 'excluding' the (deserving) middle classes through classed shibboleths including knowing the rights words to use and the right ways to behave. This section is represented in derogatory terms, characterized as 'boozy half-wits' (Moir, *The Daily Telegraph*, 18.04.07), as 'throwbacks' (suggesting a very un-modern category), and as 'an unthinking clique that might be called yobbish if it were not so monied' (Gerard, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17.04.07).

The defence of middle classness mounted here attempts to pathologize such attempts at exclusion. Yet ignorance and lack of taste are exactly the terms in which middle-class commentators have distinguished the middle class itself from working-class people (Skeggs, 2004; Lawler, 2005) As Savage argues:

In some respects it appears that anyone can become part of the middle class given the right 'perspective' or 'outlook', yet the distribution of the relevant traits is in fact highly unequal, and thereby social inequality is reproduced. ... [D]irect reference to class is effaced at the same time that class inequalities are more powerfully reproduced (Savage, 2000: 158).

So, there is an apparent contradiction here between the claimed openness of the middle classes (since everyone can be self-made, anyone can be middle-class, or so it's claimed) and the ways in which the middle classes retain their position vis-à-vis the working class through accumulating wealth (passed through the generations), paying relatively little tax and having access to various material and cultural assets: but also through arrogating to themselves 'desirable' dispositions and character traits. Hence working-class people are castigated, not primarily for being poor, but for being ignorant, immoral and out of control (Skeggs, 1997, 2004, Haylett, 2001). One way to resolve this contradiction would lie in the implicit claims that those who are middle-class 'naturally' possess the appropriate characteristics, not only of hard work and thrift but of good taste and good manners. Indeed, this invocation of 'admirable' character traits suffuses press coverage, through words such as 'unassuming, dignified, silent'. Yet this is disrupted when these natural characteristics are implicitly or explicitly called into question: in other words, when the authority of the middle classes to define what counts as right or wrong in terms

of taste, knowledge and characteristics, is (seen as being) challenged. This is one of the contradictions which is being managed through this press reportage. The next section considers how notions of nature and ordinariness are used to defuse the threat implicit in these stories.

‘Normal people’: displacing class through ‘nature’

When I was at university and thinking of going into journalism, an older, well-meaning student advised me to add an ‘e’ to my name. ‘It will look a bit more refined on your byline,’ she said. A tutor who overheard was appalled. ‘Ugh, how bourgeois,’ he said. Normal people, of course, couldn’t give two hoots either way. (Carol Midgley, ‘Pretentious names’, *The Times*, 21.04.07)

The defence of middle-class existence discussed in the preceding section took place within the context of a series of variations on a theme that while class *does* matter to some people, it ought not to; and, furthermore, that to notice ‘class’ (in the sense of social distinctions) is to display a lack of ‘class’ in the sense of a set of personal characteristics¹⁴. This leads to the interesting suggestion that it is not ‘classy’ to notice class¹⁵ and, further, that an attention to issues of ‘etiquette’ (in Bourdieu’s terms, ‘the right ways of being and doing’) is inauthentic, as in Jane Shilling’s comment that ‘Natural behaviour is more authentic than the mannerist contortions of etiquette (Shilling, *The Times*, 20.04.07).

If it is not ‘classy’ to notice class, then what is it? One way in which the alleged attacks on the Middletons were de-valued was through a characterization of a concern with manners and etiquette, not as aristocratic (despite coming, allegedly, from members of the aristocracy), but as bourgeois. Michael Gove, for example,

writing in *The Times*, reminisces about an editor on the *Tatler*, trying to disguise her middle-class, suburban ('Metro-land') origins by using the correct, 'U' words and expressions, only to find that her (presumably upper-class) co-workers undermined her by reverting to non-U phrases. Characterizing her behaviour as 'pretentious', Gove continues:

What she failed most of all to grasp, however, and what so many commentators in the wake of the Great Kate Break-Up have failed to grasp, is that those with the most class mind least. It is, in short, rather vulgar to notice someone's class background, let alone to refer to it or to judge someone on that basis. ... To be too decorous or euphemistic [is] to be that fretful, frightful thing, a bourgeois, and therefore of less distinction than a couldn't-give-a-toss, call-a-spade-a-spade aristo (Gove, *The Times*, 18. 4. 2007)

So, the 'aristocratic' attacks on a bourgeois woman come from people who reveal themselves to be *more* bourgeois than she herself is. 'Bourgeois' here is cast adrift from any notion of social division or social privilege to indicate an over-concern with social indicators. This usage of the term 'bourgeois' is somewhat different to its use through other stories, where it is used interchangeably with 'middle-class', usually to confer value. Here, it references an anxious concern to 'get it right'. Crucially, it shows the effort of *learning* which, as I noted earlier, ought to be disavowed in favour of suggestions of innate knowledge. This use of 'bourgeois' is similar to Bourdieu's analysis of the petit-bourgeois habitus:

In a whole host of markets ... the cultural productions of the petit-bourgeois habitus are subtly discredited because they recall their acquisition in matters

in which, more than anywhere else, the important thing is to know without ever having learnt (Bourdieu, 1986: 330).

So the aristocrats being represented here become bourgeois (or perhaps petit-bourgeois) through their concern with social nuance. In contrast, the 'real' bourgeoisie is 'natural' and unconcerned with social nuance, having instead an innate and essential relationship with good taste. What is being claimed here is that the middle classes embody *both* the conventional elements of thrift and accumulation (in contrast to their assumed lack in the aristocracy) *and* the easy familiarity with manners and taste (uncontaminated by learning) claimed by the aristocracy (Bourdieu, 1986).

To press the point home, the royal family¹⁶ (or at least 'senior royals') are represented as unconcerned with social distinction, often in interesting, if not quite believable, ways:

I don't believe for one moment that the senior royals, and the Queen in particular, would look down their noses at good people such as Michael and Carole Middleton. (Moir, *The Daily Telegraph*, 18.04.2007)

[T]he Queen is far too kind and wouldn't have given a stuff about how Mrs Middleton introduced herself. She and the royal family don't know anything about social nuance and all the things we run around with at the lower levels (Cooper, *The Sunday Times*, 22.04.2007)

They're the most un-snobbish of anyone in the country, the Royals. (Mary Killen (author of *The Spectator's* etiquette column) quoted in Harris, 17.04.07)

So, while William's friends and courtiers might be odious, the Royal Family itself – or at least 'senior royals' - are exempt from what becomes characterized as 'snobbishness' and 'social pretension' – not because they themselves are bourgeois (although there are one or two attempts to portray the Queen as an elderly middle-class housewife), but because they are properly classy and it is not 'done' – it is not classy - to notice class. To notice class is a breach of the etiquette that instantiates class. This leads to the awkward contradiction in which the really classy are not classed at all. Yet this cannot be maintained:

The irony is that the Royal Family – which has met more non-U folk than any clan in Britain – has a pretty good record on class. ... The Windsors have an instinctive understanding that they must connect with the people and share their values.

[...]

I find it hard to believe [the Queen] would turn against anyone for committing the supposed calumny of saying 'pleased to meet you'. If Carole Middleton ... did employ such a greeting, the Queen would surely have taken it as it was meant: a friendly courtesy from one not sufficiently privileged to have enjoyed an expensive education. (Gerard, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17.04.07).

Note that Gerard does not claim that it doesn't *matter* what kind of greeting Carole Middleton deployed. He is not claiming that such classed shibboleths don't exist: merely that the well-bred are prepared to overlook the 'wrong' usage from their social inferiors. So, there is a move here from social nuance not mattering to a suggestion that the really classy won't mind about classed 'mistakes'. This suggestion, however, can only work if class and social nuance *do* matter after all, and if classed mistakes are *possible*.

To an extent, the stories can simply be seen as an attempt to strip value¹⁷ from the aristocracy. A fictive 'we' (the middle class) are constituted as ordinary (read natural): 'they' (the aristocracy) are 'snobbish' and work on the basis of artificial, socially made distinctions. As an added twist, the royal family can be incorporated into this fictive 'we' since they, too, it is claimed, operate without regard for artificial distinctions.

This is also apparent in the attribution of 'class' to Kate Middleton:

As for Kate herself, she obviously has tremendous poise, natural beauty and a loving family. Having been through the fire of media pressure she has retained her cool in a way that proves she is a class act (Gove, *The Times*, 18.04.07)

And surely [Prince William] could silence these vicious royal backroom boys who reach for their phones and their media contacts, keen to put an appropriately haughty gloss upon this very ordinary story. She said toilet! She

said pardon! She wore a cheap suit! While Kate reaches for a silent smile and her tennis racket. Now which is more classy? (Miles, *The Times*, 18.04.07)

So Kate Middleton, while *not* aristocratic (that is the point) is constituted as *more* aristocratic than the 'real' aristocracy. Her classiness is characterized as a 'natural' attribute, her 'aristocracy' innate. This is similar to Couldry's (2001) observations on the public response to Princess Diana:

Diana, as so many posthumous tributes claimed, was the 'real' royal (although in fact only royal by marriage) because she was more 'ordinary' than the (in fact real, since hereditary) royals who had lost touch with 'ordinary people' (Couldry, 2001: 227)¹⁸.

Culture becoming natural

To recap, then, nature (or ordinariness, or normality) is used within these stories in two ways: first, to suggest that those who are truly 'upper class' act naturally and hence take no notice of status distinctions; and secondly, to suggest that true classiness is itself natural and is not – and cannot be – learned.

'Class' here is used to refer to a property of the person, something natural and embodied. But class in the more conventional – we might say sociological – sense is also invoked. This is class as an artificial system, a system which, as Sayer (2002) observes, everyone agrees is socially rather than naturally produced: a system which relies on artificial (i.e. 'made') social distinctions.

So two meanings of class are circulating here as, I'd argue, they circulate more widely. These are, class as a personal attribute (as in 'classiness') and class as a

socially-produced and inequitable system of difference and differentiation. It might be tempting to argue that the second meaning is ‘really’ about class, while the first isn’t (that is, to impose a sociological definition on lay actors’ understandings) but I think this would be to miss the point about the ways in which the two meanings slide into each other. That is, when claims to middle-class normality and universality are at stake, class as a system of social differentiation and social distinction can be eclipsed by a notion of class as a natural property of the person.

I would suggest that this attribution of class as a natural category is especially marked in the case of women. Hence, it is no accident that the focus here is on Kate Middleton’s mother, and not her father (who hardly gets a mention). Historically, women played a specific role in the emergent bourgeoisie (Gunn, 2005): responsible for overseeing the acculturation of the next generation, they were also understood as embodying the cultural capital of the household. As Simon Gunn argues, by the second half of the nineteenth century, ‘Women, especially married women, represented embodied cultural capital; they were arbiter and proof of distinction (or of its vulgar other)’ (Gunn, 2005: 55). Women, then, had to incorporate the proof of ‘class’ within their persons. This is intensified by mythic stories of social mobility (marrying the prince!) found in contemporary fairy-stories such as *Pretty Woman*, in which the woman’s ‘true’ classiness is seen by her male social superior and allowed to emerge through the ‘mask’ of her diminished class status. Again, women are the bearers of a class that is made inherent, a part of the self, in ways that appear to apply less intensively to men (see Johnson and Lawler, 2005).

What this suggests is that ‘class’ can be naturalized since it can be held to rely on personal characteristics which are ‘naturally’ acquired. The existence of these

two understandings of class - as a property of the person and as an artificial system - provides a way to see why people are not necessarily embarrassed and evasive when it comes to class, as Andrew Sayer (2002) claims they are. Sayer argues that class is *recognized* as a morally unjust system and that this recognition generates an unease. But I think the potential of class always to be naturalized is a reason why we find that people are frequently able to talk about class without any embarrassment or evasion – because what they *seem* to be talking about are natural, personal properties, rather than artificial (and unjust) social categorizations.

Yet in these stories, a recognition is forced that characteristics exhibited even by the solidly middle class (sufficiently privileged to mix with the Royal Family!) can be subject to hostile scrutiny. Hence the taken-for-granted ‘nature’ of bourgeois culture is challenged. A recognition of different ways of talking, acting and being (importantly, excepting those of the working classes) forces an acknowledgment that a naturalized ‘culture’ may, after all, have been learned.

Concluding remarks

If these stories indicate a class struggle, it is a struggle about normative value: about what is to count as good (Sayer, 2002). It is about who has the power to name certain tastes dispositions and manners as the ‘right’ ones. The whole language of U and non-U stands as a recognition of this symbolic economy whether it’s being deployed to ridicule the use of the word ‘toilet’, or, as in these representations, to condemn those who notice who does and who doesn’t use the word ‘toilet’. But this very language – and this recognition that certain things are done, said and noticed and certain things are not – undermine the notion that such tastes and dispositions

and knowledges are universal – a claim to universalism which, as Bourdieu has argued, underwrites bourgeois existence.

Notions of ‘nature’ and of ‘ordinariness’, then, while used to critique the use of classed judgements or to cast them as ‘snobbish’, simultaneously reinstate class, since they are used as critiques of people and practices who / which bring to light and make explicit the *social conditions* through which a classed habitus is produced¹⁹. In these stories, to reveal the work it takes to acquire ‘classiness’ is immediately to show that one lacks ‘classiness’. Yet these are precisely the terms on which Carole Middleton – descendant of Durham coal miners – could be condemned, so press coverage here has to manage multiple contradictions and ultimately journalists’ invocation of nature is bound to fail.

It may be that the concerns expressed within this press coverage are specifically English obsessions: certainly, more comparative work is needed before any wider claims could be made. However, my aim in this article has been to highlight some of the ways in which class is necessarily relational – a relation which is about classification itself. It has also been to consider how English middle-class identity has to be seen in relation, not only to working-class, but also to aristocratic identities, or at least to middle-class imaginings of them. In this respect, to reduce class to a status hierarchy would be to lose this relational aspect, and indeed to lose the complexity of current classed relations in England. The aristocracy are not straightforwardly ‘at the top’, but neither do they occupy the same abjected position as poor whites: they receive, at least in this coverage, none of the extreme forms of symbolic violence or class hatred present in representations of white working-class people. Yet neither are they straightforwardly admired or looked up to. In the

historical struggle that is the emergence of the middle classes, these (middle) classes have succeeded in claiming the normative ground.

Finally, I have tried to problematize this hold of middle-classness on all that is normal, natural and desirable. This problematizing is important, I suggest, for any attempt to fully understand the dynamics of class in contemporary England, and no doubt further afield also. The stories discussed here indicate a brief moment in which a similar challenge seems to have been felt to have been mounted. The ways in which this challenge was negotiated tells us something about the ways in which 'middle class' works in the cultural imaginary of the middle classes themselves.

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Notes

¹ Indeed, their continued existence has been seen in terms of a failure in a bourgeois revolution (Nairn, 1988; but see Chaney, 2001)

² This is not to argue that anyone could be 'classless', not least because people are classed by other people. It is, rather, to highlight the ways in which no class could be seen as a unitary actor.

³ The Act extended the franchise to male heads of households.

⁴ This chimes with the Kantian distinction, used to such effect by Bourdieu (1986), between 'the court' (over-cultivated) and 'the people' (under-cultivated) against which, he suggests, European middle classes came to define themselves as having a monopoly on 'true culture'.

⁵ Conversely, much class theory has been unconcerned with processes of how people come to be the way they are.

⁶ 'Broadsheet' is an anachronism, though still widely used (it refers to the fact that all the 'quality' press used to be in 'large-sheet' format: now *The Telegraph* is the only national broadsheet – in the strict sense – in the UK).

⁷ Articles were accessed from LexisNexis. There were 563 stories on 'Kate Middleton' between April 2004 and August 2007. (193 since the split in April 2007 and 93 in April alone). 39 stories since the split and 84 in total explicitly contained the word 'class'. Almost all others implicitly referenced 'class'.

⁸ Between 86% and 91% of the readership of these titles is in 'professional or managerial' occupations (ABC1) (NRS, 2007).

⁹ Indeed, Mitford's book was invoked by several journalists in their coverage of this story, though few referred to the inclusion of a serious academic study of language use.

¹⁰ The press stories were often internally confused and repetitive. None of the parties involved being available for comment, journalists had to rely on unattributed quotes from royal 'insiders', or on comment from experts on etiquette and / or on the upper classes.

¹¹ I was surprised to find that only one article explicitly invoked a 'class is dead' argument: several did however, suggest that class *should not* matter.

¹² Hate figures like the 'chav' by contrast, do not try to escape their milieu and thus confirm their own lack of worth since they do not recognize that they ought to be escaping it.

¹³ My thanks to one of the anonymous referees for this insight.

¹⁴ The OED defines class in its informal meaning as 'an impressive stylishness in appearance or behaviour'.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that such a critique of an attention to class was entirely absent from earlier representations I analysed, the focus of which was *working-class* women. See Lawler, 2002.

¹⁶ I became aware, during the writing of this paper, of the importance of distinguishing between aristocracy and royalty. However, there is not space here to explore these differences and, in any case, within these stories, both groups *largely* function in similar ways, as a negative foil to the bourgeoisie. This quotation is from a rare story in which they do not.

¹⁷ I take this concept from Skeggs (2004).

¹⁸ This is also apparent in Earl Spencer's eulogy at Princess Diana's funeral:

Diana was the very essence of compassion, of duty, of style, of beauty. ... Someone with a natural nobility who was classless and who proved in the last year that she needed no royal title to continue to generate her particular brand of magic.

<http://www.britannia.com/diana/article4.html>

¹⁸ See also Savage (2005).

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